


GUY PÈNE DU BOIS



*AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES*

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART



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# GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

BY

ROYAL CORTISSOZ



*AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES*

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

TEN WEST EIGHTH STREET • NEW YORK

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## FOREWORD

*THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.*

*For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Kraushaar Galleries for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.*

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*  
Whitney Museum of American Art



GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

# GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

BY

ROYAL CORTISZOZ

THE rewarding artist is always the one who uses his own idiom, comments on life in such wise that we know him for a newcomer, unconventional and interesting. Such an artist is Guy Pène du Bois. If he has gained steadily in repute by the work he has put forth in the last twenty-five years it has been because he has affirmed himself distinctively, emulating no man in the painting of his pictures but beating out a method of his own. Nevertheless he has had more than one instructor. In his 'teens he studied under William M. Chase, J. Carroll Beckwith and Frank Vincent Du Mond. Later he was taught by Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller. In Paris, for a brief period, he had Steinlen for a master, who proved, surprisingly enough, a poor one. But nothing that he has exhibited from the time of his first public appearance, which was in the Salon of 1905, has in the least suggested any of these teachers. Perhaps, unconsciously, in his French days, he was influenced by Forain, but that would be only in respect to his satirical vein and on the whole his point of view has remained essentially personal.

If it was nurtured by any external forces it would be by those embodied in the character and circle of the man of letters who was his father. The elder du Bois got him into the habit of reading and thinking. There is perhaps a prophetic touch, too, in the fact that he was named for Guy du Maupassant, an old family friend, who used to remember his birthday with notes and books. The atmosphere in which he grew up, literary and sophisticated, was one to turn him into a more or less caustic observer. This is what he has been. This is what has pulled him through—a sharp vision, supported by a sound technique.

I make much of the technique. Completely though he may have

avoided crass emulation of what was going on about him in the schools, as regards elements of style, he profited there in the mint and cummin of pure workmanship. He has made himself a draughtsman and understands form. With form he has studied movement and gets the carriage of a figure, the meaning of a gesture or the turn of a head, and all this interests me the more because his truths are defined with great simplicity. He remembers Whistler's axiom on the artist's being known by what he leaves out. In a picture like the *Girls, Champs Elysées*, the figures are brushed in with the fewest generalizing strokes and the background is stated in terms as summary. But the effect is decisively expressive, one apprehends the group and the scene as in a flash. Observation could not manifest itself in a form terser, more epigrammatic. A skilful hand accounts for it and a piercing eye, but of equal importance is what, to be sure, strikes me as being really at the root of this painter's success, his flair for character.

I think, for a moment, of *Rue de la Santé*, a picture in which a young man and a young woman stand talking together near a street lamp, in inclement weather. The issue between the two is not apparent. There is no drama to be surmised. Here is no "painted anecdote." But for the life of me I cannot withhold my interest from whatever the talkers are discussing. The air of Parisian life is about them. What they are doing may be of no serious import whatever but these people are themselves, two significant creatures out of the great human spectacle. They are emphatically not examples of that wearisome phase of modern art, the phase which reduces men and women to the common denominator of still life. The man has personality and so has the woman. Their encounter may not be momentous but neither can it be quite purposeless. And even when the motive is, intrinsically, purposeless, du Bois lifts his figures to a higher power through his gift for mordant characterization. There is a picture of his called simply *Waiter!* in which a couple of diners in the corner of a veranda pause to be further served. One can hear the sound

issuing from the wide opened mouth and, what is more, one takes in the whole meaning of the impatient baldhead. His companion, too, what life, what individuality, you recognize in her reposeful, curiously meditative face! You almost have contact with her thoughts about her host. Again one loses sight of a trivial theme in the serious, almost philosophical implications extorted from it.

Du Bois has often enough painted a blithe, friendly subject. In his *Masked Ball* his figures move in the dance. There is naught but the *joie de vivre* in the *Grande Bleue*, *Nice* or the amusing *Americans*, *Paris*, or the vivid *Carnival*. But he is at his best, as it seems to me, when a trace of cynicism creeps into his delineations. It is not the cynicism that places its victim in an anomalous situation, that elaborately organizes its sting. It is rather the cynicism that dispassionately impales a type, and, practicing again the art of omission, leaves it to speak for itself. A good illustration is provided in the *Restaurant No. 1*, where nothing happens but the heavy physiognomy portrayed reveals a soul. Another—and one of the most entertaining—is to be seen in the picture called *Pouter Pigeon*. What the portly, bearded man in the scene is saying to the two women before him is of no earthly consequence. Indeed, I am not sure that he is saying anything. It is enough that he lives and pompously has his being, a fat figure of fun with pouter pigeon written all over him. Some of du Bois' women have the same devastatingly representative character, as in the *Sisters*, *Café du Dôme*, or the vacuous-looking young thing with the startled profile in the *Morning*, *Paris Café*. There is often an acid streak in the work of this artist.

It is acid but it is true and therein lies the whole validity of what du Bois has produced. I have alluded to the prevalent custom of painting men and women as objects of still life. I may glance also with regret at the disposition of some artists to rely too much upon their subjects as such, as though merely to depict people in a café or on the street were to inject life into art. The reason that du Bois gets more "bite" into his

work is that he brings a deeper sense of life at large to his treatment of a specific subject, a sense of life that is broader and more analytical than that of the still life painter. His figures have character because he himself has emotions and can live over, in imagination, the lives of the people he paints. I am impressed, too, by his freedom from the merely "literary" point of view. Grateful for a bookish upbringing, he notwithstanding stays a painter rather than a raconteur. The proof lies in the vitality of impressions of his that mark the very extreme of his rejection of the dramatic motive, the very extreme of his way of arresting a type and leaving it to be its own justification. I am thinking particularly of the *Bill Board*, in which he portrays a girl standing before a wall and presenting her back to the beholder. The figure is, comparatively speaking, null, and immobile into the bargain. Yet it is not really meaningless. Somehow this young wayfarer carries the conviction of individuality, detaches herself from all other idlers, functions truly as a human creature. The first and the last word to be evoked by contemplation of the paintings of du Bois is that the people in them are alive, that he has placed honest technique at the service of an interested conception of sentient beings.

His thoughtful realism gives him a rank more important than is superficially evident. His paintings are, as I have shown, of types rather than incidents and involve him in no lofty flights of composition. But the tone, the temper of these paintings is what gives them point, the sympathy and the wit behind them, and in this he follows the memorable tradition of Daumier and Forain. He may not have their power. Who has? But he shares their questing, *malin* spirit, looking about him with a consciousness of the weakness and folly of mankind and reporting thereon with a mental vivacity that is half the battle. He looks on at the actors in his cosmos as if he were watching a show but there is nothing of the theatre in his reflection of the proceedings, nothing factitious. He is, instead, direct and clear. This reflection is, too, as I suggested at the

beginning, very much his own. He has only lately returned from France, where he has had every opportunity to savor the influence of the so-called Parisian school, the school of Picasso, Matisse and the rest. But modernism has left him ploughing his own furrow. He was no imitator in his youth and he is no imitator in his prime. It is not enough to say that this is because he knows how to paint. It is also because he uses his brains. His art is life seen through a temperament, through a mentality. It is a vital thing.



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

GUY PÈNE DU BOIS was born in Brooklyn, New York, January 4th, 1884. His father, Henri Pène du Bois, was born in New Orleans, La., where the family first landed in 1738. He was a writer on art, literature and music; his "Four Private Libraries of New York" is one of the first books on bibliography published in America. His mother, Laura Hague, was born in Stamford, Conn.

Guy Pène du Bois studied in the Chase School, New York City, 1899-1905, under Carrol Beckwith, William M. Chase, Frank Vincent Du Mond, Robert Henri and Kenneth Hayes Miller. His first trip to Europe was in 1905, where he studied in Paris under Steilen. Returned to New York in 1906 to work as reporter and then as art critic on the *New York American*; later assistant to Mr. Royal Cortissoz on the *New York Tribune* for one year and then, for two years, art critic of the *New York Evening Post*. He was editor of *Arts and Decoration*, under several different ownerships for a total of about seven years. His second trip to Europe was from 1924 to 1930. He first exhibited in the Salon des Beaux Arts, 1906. Since that time his work has been exhibited in most of the principal European and American cities.

His work is represented in many private collections and in the following public institutions: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Newark Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art, Los Angeles Museum of Art, Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C., Detroit Institute of Arts, Barnes Foundation, Merion, Pa., Gallery of Living Art, New York, N.Y., and the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

WOMAN WITH CIGARETTE, 1929

h.  $30\frac{1}{4}$  inches w.  $28\frac{3}{4}$  inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*



FATHER AND SON, 1929

H. 20 inches    W. 15 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*





BALLOON WOMAN  
FOREST OF RAMBOUILLET, 1928  
h.  $36\frac{1}{4}$  inches w.  $28\frac{3}{4}$  inches



MASKED BALL, 1929  
h.  $28\frac{3}{4}$  inches w.  $36\frac{1}{4}$  inches

*Collection of Mr. John F. Kraushaar, New York*



GRANDE BLEUE, NICE, 1929

h.  $28\frac{3}{4}$  inches    w.  $30\frac{1}{4}$  inches





AMERICANS, PARIS, 1928

H.  $28\frac{3}{4}$  inches    W.  $36\frac{1}{4}$  inches

*Collection of Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr.  
New York*





GIRLS. MONT-PARNASSE. 1927

h. 20 inches w. 15 inches

*Collection of Mr. William F. Laporte, Passaic, N. J.*



CARNIVAL. 1927  
h.  $36\frac{1}{4}$  inches w.  $28\frac{3}{4}$  inches



MORNING, PARIS CAFE, 1926

h.  $36\frac{1}{4}$  inches w.  $28\frac{3}{4}$  inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*





OPERA BOX, 1926  
H. 57½ inches W. 45½ inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*





THE LITTLE REDON, 1925

h. 20 inches w. 15 inches

*Collection of Mr. John F. Kiaushaar, New York*



RESTAURANT SCENE, NO. I, 1921

h. 20 inches   w. 15 inches

*Chester Dale Collection, New York*



HALLWAY. ITALIAN RESTAURANT, 1922

h.  $25\frac{1}{4}$  inches w.  $20\frac{1}{4}$  inches

*Chester Dale Collection, New York*



POUTER PIGEON, 1922  
H.  $29\frac{1}{2}$  inches    W.  $23\frac{1}{2}$  inches  
*Chester Dale Collection, New York*





JEANNE EAGLES IN "RAIN," 1922

h. 84 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches w. 48 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*



THE CONFIDENCE MAN, 1919

h. 20 inches w. 15 inches

*Chester Dale Collection, New York*



BLONDE AND BRUNETTE

h. 20 inches w. 15 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*



Guy Pène du Bois

BILL BOARD, 1919  
H. 24 inches    W. 20 inches





SOCIAL REGISTER, 1919

h. 20 inches w. 14 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*



WATFER! 1912

H. 16 inches    W. 12 inches

*Collection of Mr. William F. Laporte, Passaic, N. J.*







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